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THE RELIGIOUS OPINIONS
OF
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

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ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

AS EXPRESSED IN THREE LETTERS ADDRESSED TO

WM. MERRY, Esq., J.P.

Edited by the Rev.

W. Robertson Nicoll, LL.D.

LONDON:
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that of this book

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MRS. BROWNING'S RELIGIOUS OPINIONS,
AS EXPRESSED IN THREE LETTERS,

ADDRESSED TO WM. MERRY, ESQ., J.P.

IN 1843 Mr. Merry, of "The Highlands," near Reading, a friend of Miss Mitford, published through G. Lovejoy, London Street, Reading, and Whittaker and Hamilton, London, a little pamphlet on "Predestination and Election, Considered Scripturally."¹ In this he dealt with the seventeenth article of the Church of England, and contested the Calvinistic interpretation. Mr. Merry's point is familiar. His objection is not to election so much as to reprobation. Difficult passages "should be brought by the Christian mind at once to the great test of Scriptural revelation on the nature of God's known attributes, and when thus held up to the pure light of a gospel abounding in assurances of His unerring justice and mercy, all that is doubtful will disappear like mists before the effulgence of the sun." He sums up as follows:—

¹ *Predestination | and | Election, | Considered Scripturally. | By | William Merry, Esq. | | Reading: | Printed and Published by G. Lovejoy, London-Street ; | and Whittaker and Hamilton, London. | 1843. Duodecimo, pp. 76.*

"Inasmuch, therefore, as all who 'search the scriptures,' or hear the gospel preached, find themselves therein instructed how to 'repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance' (Acts 26, 20), we may be firmly assured, that there does not live one human being, so taught, who is shut out from the pale of Christian salvation by predestiny, partial favour, or any other than his own wilful and inexcusable unbelief; (inexcusable, for it is beyond conception that man should be so earnestly appealed to, and encouraged to believe in God, holy and true, and yet not be enabled to obey the gracious bidding;) not one who is not *equally* and vitally interested in the offer of mercy, or who is denied sufficient means for the acceptance of that gospel which was preached to the poor, the 'glad tidings of great joy which are for all people,' and who has not grateful cause to join the 'Heavenly Host' in their hymn of praise, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men.'"

It will be remembered that these letters were written three years before Miss Barrett married. She was then, as always, in delicate health, but evidently had recovered from the extreme prostration of previous years. To this recovery her friendship with Miss Mitford had in no small degree contributed.

Cordial thanks are due to Mr. Robert Barrett Browning for his courteous permission to print these letters.

LETTERS.

LETTER I.

50 WIMPOLE STREET,
LONDON.

November 2nd, 1843.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

If you did not threaten me up to the top of your actual threat I should still have gratitude enough in me to answer your kind note, and acknowledge your gift of a work upon a great subject, believe me. You never thought to the contrary for a moment, I am sure. But you did think, and with reason, that I should decline a controversy with you upon a subject which I profess not to understand, and upon which I believe (considering the bare fact that persons of equal piety and spiritual instruction otherwise, do differ upon it directly) that the Church is not instructed by the Holy Spirit to come to a definite understanding. You charge me, however, too earnestly to leave me free to the silence, which (after thanking you) I should choose. I will speak openly, as you desire it, and so when it comes to the worst, I must remain, as the contract renders it, Mr. Merry's *friend*, which will not leave me inconsolable.

Your book (to begin from the beginning) is written in a spirit so amiable and conciliating—so Christian-heartedly, to use a more applicable expression—that it almost reconciles me to the controversial character of its subject.

It is a book likely to do good to many with whom it would fail in particular persuasion, and again and again as I read along, I felt—" *That* is true,"—" *that* is rightly put,"—" we should remember *that* ! "

And now, from the construction of that last sentence, you will think that I disagree with you altogether—and I do disagree with you—but not altogether.

The truth is, dear Mr. Merry, that Arminians in general would call me a Calvinist, while Calvinists would call me an Arminian. I certainly do not believe in particular redemption and predestination in the strong Calvinistic view of them. I believe so far in particular grace, as that no human being can be saved, "except the Father draw him," except the Saviour redeem him, except the Holy Spirit "list" to breathe on him. And I believe so far in free will and responsibility, as that every human being who is lost, will stand in the midst of his fulfilled experience and witness before the universe, "Woe is *me*, for *I* have sinned ; it is by my own choice that I am here."

That there is contradiction in this, apparent contradiction, I do not deny ; but my impression of scriptural revelation is, that these two points, apparently contradictory as they are, are equally revealed by God ; and that the key of the reconciling interpretation is in Christ's hand, with the Keys of Death and Hades, far beyond the reach of ours. Probably the turning point of the whole argument lies in a distinction (as you suggest) between God's fore-knowledge and His pre-ordination—although you are probably aware that when human metaphysicians begin to inquire into the several natures of these acts, they

both seem to merge, under the crown of deity, in pre-ordination—nothing being an object of knowledge with God which had not been an object of ordination by Him. And thus, “within the deepest depth a deeper depth,” we fall from the mystery of predestination to the mystery of the origin of evil—and if you write another book upon *that*, dear Mr. Merry, you will charge me perhaps, at the hazard of forfeiting your friendship, to follow it up with the appendix of a private controversy. Will you?

Ah! you do not think me pert and light and perverse, I hope, upon these solemn things. It is because they are solemn to me; serious and important to me; it is because I have resolved them seriously, and according to the best powers of my mind; it is because I have again and again sought with humility and earnestness for the meaning of God’s will in relation to these great points, that I now sink back ashamed and afraid, and willing not to be wise beyond what is written. Let us believe, let us pray, and may God be blessed that we know enough to believe as that and pray. And “When the end cometh, whatever may have been the measure of grace, the measure of *justice* to every living soul, will be such as a divine knowledge of our very thoughts will render perfect.” I agree with you perfectly, it is admirably said. For the rest, you will be patient with me while I very humbly doubt whether your book is successful in the interpretation of the Church of England articles against the Calvinistic theory. I am not myself a member of the Church of England, and therefore whichever way the articles may lean, is of the less

importance to me. But certainly, if words mean anything, and if the obvious meaning of the words of the seventeenth article is to be received in all honesty, why it is a Calvinistic article, and could scarcely by any imaginable change of expression (according to my apprehension of it) be rendered more Calvinistic. I am bold enough to think, my dear friend, that it is your will, and not your reason, which consents unaware to this anti-Calvinistic rendering.

If Bishop Mant endeavours to colour the interpretation anti-Calvinistically, you will admit with an all-conquering candour, that other bishops would colour it Calvinistically; and that nearly the whole evangelical party of the Church of England does receive the article in the Calvinistic sense. In the obvious meaning of the words, my impression is, that they do so rightly receive and apprehend it, and that any Calvinist among them would be puzzled if called upon to compose another article, in other words, than those used in the Church of England, yet as Calvinistic in the full bearing and expression.

The view of the nature of Faith, commonly called Calvinistic, is, in my view of it, altogether scriptural, and very important to be held strongly. By an expression or two you seem to reject it, but as you open out your own view it grows to be absolutely Calvinistic, and I could not express my own creed upon the point in question in preciser words, I think.

The Arminian view, held and preached on the subject of works by the majority of Church of England divines, and by the whole Puseyite party, is, is it not? that man is saved by his works, and not by Christ's work—by works

rather than faith—while the Calvinistic view that man is saved by faith in Christ's work, and not by works of his own ; by a living faith, the blossom of which is good works, is opposed to the other, and comprises the great good news of the New Testament. "That human virtues however excellent and *indispensable* as an evidence of faith, and as such 'pleasing in God's sight,' do not and cannot form the groundwork of man's justification," is all that the Calvinistic body contends for, however they may be commonly misrepresented on this point of doctrine. There may be indeed a very small number of persons antinomians in a worse sense, but the class is very small indeed, and I believe that when the individuals of it begin to explain their own meanings, they are for the most part convicted of meaning something very different and more scriptural indeed, than their actual profession. To call a faith which will not work, *faith*, is to call a corpse, a man, or a parricide, an affectionate child. Good works are as absolutely a consequence of faith as salvation is—but the quarrel is whether salvation turns upon faith or upon works as a ground-work ; and thus your language is perfectly satisfactory to those who hold faith to be the ground-work.

(There is only one work which brings salvation, and that is Christ's upon the Cross. And He saves us *that we may work*, and *not because we work*. Is it not so ?

For the rest, I differ from you in holding fast what is called "the final perseverance of the saints," believing that the general spirit of scriptural promise is for it, although a few passages may seem to militate against it.

Will you permit me to add to these divers boldnesses, one more, greater than the rest, in the expression of a deep regret that you should have embodied in your book the very objectionable (as it appears to me) extract from Mr. Hare, to become "elect of God" by baptizing, and a "member of Christ by virtue of a sacrament!"

Is this scriptural, in whatever light we record it?

And now if I have not sinned against the liberty granted to me, beyond forgiveness, *will* you favour me, and be one with me consciously (as I trust we are actually) in the brotherhood of Jesus Christ? "To walk together as far as we are agreed," is the duty of all Christians, and should be the pleasure of those who differ the most widely, so that "unity of the Church" which is now "hid in Christ," yet talked of so much and so vainly, may be guessed at a little in its right sense, by the world.

But for you and me, we do not differ after all *the most widely*, while it is peculiarly pleasant for one of us (that is I), to walk together agreed with the other. I respect and thank you for this employment of talent, generously offered and usefully in the great cause of religion; so much do I respect and thank you, as to take courage to wish that your next work may avoid the rocks of controversy, and be content to lead us into some green meadow beside those living waters. We do not require so much to *know* more (and every controversy perhaps which has eaten deep into the heart of the Church, refers obliquely to something unknown, unrevealed), as to *feel* and *think* more upon what we know—and the simplest and plainest scriptural subject will reward the thinker and earnest

writer, more abundantly, in all probability, than the hardest subject, as ground for work and musing.

I have written too much now, instead of too little, I am sure. Yet I must observe that poor Calvin, who has the credit of certain opinions, when extended to the uttermost could not hold them more strongly than Luther did, who grasped with his two most pugnacious fists, the dreadful doctrine of *Reprobation*.

May God bless you and lead you into all truth, and beautify the truth to you in love !

I remain, with much esteem,

Always and faithfully yours,

ELIZABETH BARRETT.

When I have used in these little sheets the term "The Church," I meant of course the Church of Christ generally, and not any particular denomination of Christians. Christ's Church is one—and we, alas ! "are many."

Faithfully yours,

ELIZABETH BARRETT.

LETTER II.

50 WIMPOLE STREET,
LONDON.

November 17th, 1843.

MY DEAR FRIEND, .

If my infinitesimal sheets go on in an approach to *ad infinitum*, they are an equivalent to the unity of your great sheet; and in fact my letter was as long, I calculate, as your own. For yours, I thank you much and cordially. I appreciate the kindness you extend to me, and in beginning a new sheet I am not going to plunge into a controversy, being under a vow not to do it, and being content to pass with you for a "rational person" and no Calvinist in any true sense of predestination after all. My creed is that controversy *does harm*, and I might say my experience is that it does harm—for I have given no superficial attention in former years to this very subject, and read the arguments (such as they are) of logicians on both sides, and gone carefully through the Scriptures with a reference to the points in question. My own inference is that the *manner* of election and predestination (those being Scriptural words, and therefore undeniable ventricles of *some* truth) is not revealed—although the total dependence of man upon God *is* revealed, as is his debility and corruption without the operation of the Holy Ghost and the word of Christ Jesus.

Nearly the whole of the second page of your letter satisfies me perfectly, and so does much of your book; however, I may yearn to cut certain pages from out of the heart of it,—the truth being, my dear friend, that you are as slack an Arminian as ever I can be a Calvinist; and that you fall into contradictions by being too spiritual yourself for those you walk with. That extract for instance!—And then you do not and cannot prove your position that the Church of England is anti-Calvinistic, on the ground of the Arminian interpretation being supported by certain members of that Church, because it is to be met on another ground of the Calvinistic interpretation being supported by other members of that Church. The knife cuts two ways. In regard to the Articles . . . to the doctrines generally of the Church of England, I reverence them, on the whole, as Christ's own doctrines; and receive them as pure and spiritual. They are the doctrines in the gross, of *all Christians*, under whatever denominations they may class themselves—and the Baptists, Congregationalists, Wesleyan Methodists, &c., hold them with as firm a hand as your bishops.

Ah! you smile at me for my schism!—And *I*, after you said you smiled, did not smile but quite laughed out, to find you “astonished” at that recreancy. Why, did you never hear that I was—a schismatic? And can you not imagine in your musing mind that a “rational person” thinking and feeling a little, as all responsible persons should, on the most important of all subjects, might (without being by any means a “controversialist by profession”) class himself or herself with the particular class of Chris-

tians which appears to approach nearest his or her view of Scriptural truth? For instance, suppose that I received the Church of England definition of a Church, *i.e.* "a congregation of godly persons"—too fully to believe in the propriety of a *National Church*—and suppose my view of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper embraced a simple obedience to the command of the Lord that we "do this in remembrance of *Him*,"—with no "mystery beyond except the depth of God's love,"—and suppose I preferred, by temperament and reflection, a simpler form of worship and teaching than are to be met with in your assemblies—and suppose, even suppose, that I believed the word "*bishop*" in the Scripture to mean a working minister,—would you blame me for approaching what appeared to me the purest form of truth?—would you esteem me unjustified in my deed, for leaving what appeared to me the impure form of truth? I appeal to your reverence for Truth,—my dear friend and brother, in the Unity of the Church of Christ, I believe,—and I believe that I do not sin against it schismatically, as long as I love Christ, and recognise in Him the brotherhood of all Believers. As there are many mansions in Heaven, so are there many Churches on earth: and the true sin of schism is (according to my perception of it) a sin against the unity of *all* the Churches of Christendom, and more or less.

And now I come to what has interested me not the least in your letter—the words about my dear friend Miss Mitford. Can it be really true that she goes to *no place of worship*? I had not even feared it. Oh, yes,—in the course of our long correspondence, and in the liberty which

she has constantly permitted to me, I have often entered upon the subject of religion with her, taking the opportunities as they were presented. Sometimes she has not answered me,—and sometimes, particularly at the period of her father's death, she did so almost satisfactorily. Certainly at that period she expressed definitely that her hope for him and herself was in Christ alone, and that in prayer and the sense of the great Hereafter lay the whole of her personal consolation. Still, I will not tell you that I am contented altogether—I love her too much. She has not, I fear, distinct views—and perhaps, perhaps, her interest in the subject (now that the moment of emotion which brings us all to the feet of God, is past) may not be strong enough to admit of much long and steady reflection. How can I be contented? More especially how can I be contented after what you tell me? Dear Mr. Merry, if you are able to do any good, *do it!* And you who have the opportunity of personal communication with her, must have occasions of useful intervention, to which any intimacy by correspondence is weak and inadequate. If you and I (for instance) were in this room together at this moment, you might fasten me down to a controversy on Predestination, and I might not be able to run away! It is so easy to escape from a subject in a correspondence,—and so difficult face to face! Oh, if you could only open the gifted mind fully, serenely, to the living truths on which depend not only a “happy futurity” but a happy present, what a benediction would be due to you both from herself and from all who love her! I should tell you that sometimes I have felt happy, and sometimes unhappy

in relation to her religious state—and, also, that she was more vividly affected by her visit to the Roman Catholic Bishop and Chapel near Bath, than she ever appeared to me to be by any cause of the kind. I had asked her (forgive me) to go to hear Mr. Jay, the Nonconformist at Bath, who has been the means of doing much good,—but she went to the Roman Catholic Chapel instead, and was too pleased to leave me quite satisfied. If she were a person of different habits of mind, I should quite have trembled when she talked lightly of “going to be a Catholic.” I tell you all, dear Mr. Merry,—and if you prove to be the instrument of doing the good to which you aspire, I shall be the first to thank God for you!—for her!! and for me!

It seems to me (in reference to your kind question) that everybody must be tired of hearing of me,—and that to be so long ill, without dying, is a decided case of black letter in the body. According to Plato, I should have been put to death long ago as a chronic patient—and really I feel a little ashamed of being alive. No wonder, therefore, that I should be silent about myself whenever I can! Yet just the reason why I should thank you for your enquiry, and reply to it by an assurance of my being considerably better upon the whole, however confined by necessity to my sofa, and one room; still my prospects change while my position remains the same, and I begin to understand that it may be God’s will (who has caused me to survive much trial of body, and mental agonies without a name) to keep me in the world to watch, wait, and perhaps work far, far longer than once (and that not very long ago) I could have believed either possible or endurable.

May He bless you in your work, and in your joys! I thank you all for your kindness to me, and entreat you to suffer me to walk by your side, as far as we are agreed, as an affectionate, however unworthy a Christian, sister should.

Faithfully yours,

ELIZABETH BARRETT.

LETTER III.

50 WIMPOLE STREET,
LONDON.

January 8th, 1844.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I hasten to reply to your kind letter because the matter of it will not suffer me to be more patient. With all my heart I rejoice in the effect likely to follow on those wise suggestions, which the true bravery of your friendship ventured; and with all my mind I subscribe to the discretion of your delicacy which would refrain from obtruding in anything after the good has been done. I perfectly understand the advantage of *silence*, both on my part and yours, and I feel also that you will need no further recompense than the consciousness of having been made an instrument of doing good, either from the person benefited, or from society. May God's blessing wait upon the performance of this obvious duty of public prayer, and open out vista beyond vista of mercy and joy for our friend.

That she is not a Unitarian I know, and I thank God she is not. For the rest, if the Gospel is preached simply in the place of worship to which she is about to go, let us hope that the want of an attractive medium will not be

felt very drearily by her, and that the Spirit of God will give of His beauty and fragrance to the least word.

I have not referred to your personal affliction in these two pages, dear Mr. Merry, but I have thought of it all the while I was writing. And my thought was (if I may tell it) that your reflections upon this good which you have done must have carried a sweetness into your sadness, and modified it with the most persuasive earthly comforting there is in the world. As for the species of sadness, I know what it is. I had heard of your affliction from Miss Mitford, and felt what the depth of it must be. Blessed are they, nevertheless, who have a double lot, the consolations of Heaven, as well as the sorrows of the earth! And yet more blessed they who in addition to their personal consolations have the privilege of giving a gift, or teaching a truth, or suggesting a hope to their fellows while suffering the common lot of grief! And as to my being Pope Joan the second—why, believe me, I have no manner of pretension to any such dignity, as you would say if you knew me better. If we do not think and feel for ourselves in matters of religion, we may as well give away our responsibility to the priest like other Roman Catholics, and cease to call ourselves Protestant Christians. And it is very clear to me that every man or woman of us all is bound to receive into practice the truth he or she consciously discerns, and *as* he or she consciously discerns it. The true schismatic is the other he or she who shall refuse to tolerate the brother or sister in Christ, on account of his or her holding a truth, or a form, in a different manner from the holding of his truth, or form. The Universal Church of Christ is one and indivisible; and

large should be the heart of its members, even as Christ's heart to them all. But the *Churches* of Christ are *many*, and the ministrations of the one Spirit are many, and the aspects of truth to the human mind are many indeed. Also there may be schism (according to my view of the term) as in a separate Church, for instance, where the members of a Baptist Church differ and divide, or where the members of a Church of England differ and divide, as in the present actual case of the Puseyites and the Evangelical party. But the Baptist Christian is no schismatic towards the Church of England Christian, nor *vice versa*; nor can either be considered a schismatic towards the Universal Christian Church. Do you not believe, my dear friend, in the unity of the *Church*, pure and undivided, in the midst of the sects? Is the dissenter a schismatic in your eyes, because he does not belong to your National Church when in Christ's eyes he is a member of the indivisible Church? For this last position is no begging of the question as long as you admit (as I am sure you do) that the believer, let him be dissenter or not, is safe in Christ.

Will you—if I read your Liturgy—read Binney's pamphlet on "Schism" for me? Will you promise to do it?

For the rest, what if every word of the Liturgy were taken from Scripture! The argument of the deduction does not favour *you* with the Church of Rome, to whom that Liturgy belongs. Without reading any book, I will admit at once that much of the Liturgy is from Scripture, and that it is (with some reserved points for objection) as beautiful a Liturgy as could be written or read, but why should not *we*, for whom Christ died, and

in whom the Spirit maketh intercession, speak to God out of the fulness of our hearts? If the spirit crieth *Abba* in us, why should not we cry it with our lips, without reading a form of speech from a Prayer Book? Was the publican's prayer a "beautiful Liturgy," or invented or arranged by men? And where many publicans meet together, who shall forbid that all "being agreed" they all "pray together" as well and unitedly as you of "the Church"?

So I entreat you to consider these things. The mystery of *love in unity* is very little understood—our hearts are not large enough for the comprehensiveness of Christ's Divine Heart; and perhaps when we are free from the body, and the Heavenly surprise brightens round us, nothing will astonish us more than a perception of the real character of our former divisions. The crooked shall be straight, and the rough places plain, in a new sense yet unconceived of. You shake your head perhaps: never mind—you will smile perhaps, *then!*

In all this I would not appear to arrogate any peculiar degree of large-heartedness to myself. We all have our prejudice—some on one subject, some on another—and I, consciously to myself, with the rest. Only I would aspire to love, even as to truth; and in speaking of Christ's Church, I would not lift one denomination over the head of another. I would reverence *the Churches*. Also I am not a Baptist but a Congregational Christian in the holding of my private opinions. Altogether you will be gentle and not call me Pope Joan any more. Shall it not be so?

And now I come to speak of Mr. Reade, and of my reasons for troubling you in such a hurry with Pope

Joanisms, is my eagerness to explain my whole mind respecting his message to me. I am very sorry (I need scarcely tell you I hope) that Mr. Reade should lie under the impression of my being aggrieved by any word of his, or any supposed word of his—and certainly to nobody in the world did I ever *complain* of his speaking such a word. The faults of my writings are unfortunately such obvious ones that the very poet does not deny them; and the best friends of the said poet can give no offence to her by admitting them. Will you say this from me to Mr. Reade? It will convince him that if the bird in the air misapprehended the matter, he (Mr. Reade) was at least wrong in supposing me offended, or even ruffled, or thrown into any attitude of complaint whatever, by the hypothesis of a criticism from him. Whatever I said about the hypothetical criticism was simply historical, only by no means intended for tradition; and I am much vexed that it should have come to that estate.

Beg Mr. Reade to forget as fast as possible everything which has been unpleasant to him in this matter, and to accept the expression of my regret in exchange for his kindness. And this is all with which I shall trouble you for the present.

For the sake of the truth which we both love, forgive the differences of opinion which it is as difficult for me to prevent as for you.

And believe me none the less on their account,

Faithfully yours,
ELIZABETH BARRETT.



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